

BELIEF WITHOUT CONFESSION.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT WHITESBORO, N. Y.

BY BERIAH GREEN.

"I am opposed to Slavery; but am not an Abolitionist."

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☞ The following train of thought has been presented at different times and on various occasions. I consent to its publication in the hope, that it may be useful. B. G.

*Whitesboro, March, 1844.*

# S E R M O N .

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JOHN XII: 42, 43.

“ Nevertheless, among the Chief Rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”

We knew before, that “the common people heard our Savior gladly.” They gathered around Him by scores and hundreds; and often hung eagerly upon His lips. They regarded Him with respect and confidence, if not with veneration. Indeed, it was a heavy task for “the gentlemen of property and standing” among them to goad the multitude on to acts of violence against their greatest Benefactor.

But now we learn, that His influence was not confined to “the common people.” It reached the high places of Jewish Society. “Among the Chief Rulers also many believed on Him.” Shall we not then congratulate the Man of Nazareth? His prospects are growing brighter. He now has friends, who may deserve the name of *patrons*. He may doubtless rely on their countenance and assistance. They will exert themselves, openly and resolutely, to shield Him from reproach and persecution. They will devote themselves to the great objects of His mission. Must not the Kingdom of Heaven be near at hand?—But what saith our historian? He tells a very different story. No such results, however fairly they might be expected, did their faith produce. “They did not confess Him!”

The fact, which the Evangelist here records, deserves earnest attention. It can hardly fail, however harsh may be its bearing on our expectations, to be highly instructive. This fact, then, let us study *in its relation to some of the various positions*, where we might fairly expect to find these “honorable” believers.

Human expectation, especially among the Jews, was on tiptoe about the time of our Savior's incarnation. With this event, psalmists and prophets had long been engrossed. It was the burden of their sweetest songs, their loftiest psalms, their most spirit-stirring anthems, their most glorious predictions. This was the centre of their hopes. It was the glory of their brightest prospects. It gave to the future its power to dispel their sorrows—to sustain and refresh their spirits. It is no wonder, then, that they dwelt on this event with the liveliest expectation, that they studied their sacred writings with especial reference to the coming Messiah. "Chief Rulers," we may well suppose, would be the very last to expose themselves to the charge of ignorance and negligence where the welfare of their country and the claims of their office were so vitally concerned. They doubtless were familiar with the aims, methods and character, which their own prophets ascribed to the expected Messiah. When, therefore, Jesus of Nazareth made His appearance, asserted His claims and entered on His work, they saw in His words and deeds clear and decisive proof, that He was the King of Israel. Of this they were well persuaded. "They believed on Him." The belief of such a truth—faith fastening itself on such a conclusion might well be expected to reach their inmost souls with transforming power. The fulfillment of their best hopes;—what an occasion of rapture and thanksgiving! Surely the least, that the joy and gratitude of these believers will permit them to do must be at once to summon their fellow-citizens around them and set before them this new discovered treasure. Friends, brethren, hear us. We announce glad tidings. The darkness, in which we have long been enveloped, shall no more oppress us. Already the serene and steadfast heavens smile upon us. "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world." "Glory to God in the highest; on earth peace, good-will to men." But is this the posture, they assumed; and this the language, they employed? Alas, far enough from that. Their belief in the Savior they conceal! It is among the secrets of their bosom! Not a word do they utter on the subject. They refuse "to confess Him"!

They heard Him charged with *blasphemy*. "Hear," say his accusers, "hear this Nazarene. Every body knows, that nothing good can

come out of Nazareth. And this man claims the character and honors of the Messiah! Who can endure such arrogant pretensions? Who could blame us for hurling stones at the blasphemer?" All this on one occasion and another our believers could hardly fail of hearing. And all this was as much against their faith as His character and prospects. They knew full well, that such accusations were false and malignant. They were well able to prove them so. What then? Did they open their lips in vindicating His claims and defending His character? How could they help exclaiming, Nay, brethren, you affirm what you do not understand. Your words are rash! The charge of arrogance and blasphemy belongs not to the Man of Nazareth. Beware. You may involve yourselves in the guilt you impute to Him so eagerly.—Such words, well explained and confirmed, did these "Chief Rulers" utter? Could any thing be better suited to their creed, position and relations? And yet, not a syllable in defense of their Savior! "They did not confess him"!

He is charged with *ambition* in their presence. He is intent, His accusers say, on regal honors. The throne of Cæsar—he is mad enough to aim at such an object! And with His gifts and activity and popular address, what mischief may He not effect? What tumults may He not excite? The jealousy of Cæsar he may at length arouse, and provoke the "Romans to take away our place and nation." All this, these Rulers knew to be utterly unfounded—a sheer fabrication—the offspring of spite and ignorance. Now surely, they will come forward to illustrate and protect his reputation. I hear them say, Ambition! Far enough from that. Had such a flame been kindled in His bosom, what place, however elevated, might He not have reached? With a genius so transcendent, with powers so commanding, with talents far above the very highest order, had He been ambitious should we now have seen Him without a place to lay His head—assisted by the charity of poor women? Nay, friends. His is not a worldly kingdom. His kingship does not depend on sumptuous fare, gaudy trappings and obsequious ministers. His is a royal heart. He is a King by nature, anointed in high Heaven. His, therefore, must be a kingly bearing; His, kingly claims and honors, whether men shout His praise or load Him with reproach.—But can it be? Am I so mistaken? No such

defense did these His professed disciples set up in behalf of their accused Savior. They held their tongues. Not a word did they utter expressive of their confidence in His integrity and wisdom! "They did not confess Him"!

Others they saw make an open profession of their faith in the Savior. In the face of contempt, reproach, persecution, one and another in their presence avowed themselves His disciples and gave themselves up to His service. And this, when their position and relations demanded less strength of character—less courage and resolution than might fairly be expected in "Chief Rulers." Surely they cannot resist the appeal which is now urged home upon every thing manly and generous in their bosoms. What! they exclaim, shall we still practice concealment when thus powerfully summoned to show ourselves? Are not these, who thus rally around the standard of the Messiah, our own brethren? Do not we, as well as they, regard Him as the Son of God? Are not our highest expectations as well as theirs fulfilled in His character and mission? Are not our obligations of gratitude and service as sacred and as strong as theirs? With our powers and resources, and at the stations which we occupy, may we not contribute as directly and as largely to the objects of His mission? Must we not die of shame if we refuse a moment longer to take our place by the side of our weaker, yet more decided brethren? But no. Not a word of this. To be sure they were "believers." But then, whoever might do so, *they* did not confess Him!

Time rolled on. They remained as much believers in the Savior as ever—as much as any of His disciples. But they maintained their old relations—kept their places in the various circles, to which they belonged. The relations of the Savior to those, for whose benefit He labored, every day modified. Every day His character was more clearly and distinctly manifested. Every day His claims as the Christ of God upon the confidence, love and service of all around Him, became more pressing and imperious. The tongue of reproach was continually growing louder and the hand of opposition more violent. At length He was dragged as a malefactor before a mock tribunal, where He was threatened with a bloody death. Here in the midst of a furious, clamorous mob, He was abandoned by all His disciples, and beneath the

peltings of a most pitiless storm left alone! But even now, when thus summoned, these "Chief Rulers" refused to come to the rescue. They held their peace. Their faith in Him was as much a secret—locked as securely in their bosoms as ever. "They did not confess Him."

What inconsistency, cowardice, treachery have we here! What indignation and disgust must we not feel in the presence of these "believers"! Their selfishness and ingratitude; in what pointed terms do they not deserve to be exposed! And yet it must not be supposed, that these men had not framed for themselves a plausible apology. Otherwise, they could not have endured the light of the sun—would have shrunk away from their own presence, ashamed and confounded. No man is stout enough to look himself in the face, and for days and weeks call himself a dastard and a villain. He will sooner cut his own throat! He must by some means keep on tolerable terms with himself. If he cannot do that, the knife of the suicide he will welcome. Hence the multiplied expedients, which men devise to justify themselves to themselves. They have been known to proceed so far as to say, that of two moral evils—of different forms of wrong-doing, they are bound to choose the least! For a choice, they allege, they *must* make! The dilemma is forced upon them, and they cannot escape! Or they assure us, that in giving their countenance and suffrage, they do not support a candidate for office *because* he is a knave and a villain. *That*, they admit, is but too just a description of his character. He may be a gambler. He may be a duelist. He may be a slave-holder.\* But then he is a patriot and a statesman! And so, they exert themselves to put their country under his control! So with these believing Rulers, doubtless they contrived to construct a theory, which protected them from present desperation; in which they could breathe and repeat their own names without falling foul of themselves. As much as this may be inferred from the words of the Evangelist. They had, he informs us, their reasons for refusing to confess Him. They were afraid of the

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\* "I do not swear as the bishop of Rochester; I swear as John Delauney." A very proper *bishop* doubtless; though *as a man* a little addicted to wrong-doing. What has his private character to do with any claims he may set up to official distinctions? Is not the Devil himself the god of this world! How can WE succeed without the smiles of his providence?

Pharisees. The synagogues were under their control. An earnest disciple of the Savior could not escape their vengeance. He could not avoid excommunication. Our believers, therefore, did not confess Him.

Doubtless, in their view there were OTHER INTERESTS which demanded their regard. That Jesus was the Christ was true enough. *In the abstract*, this conclusion was of the highest moment, vitally affecting their improvement and their welfare. It comprehended in *theory* every other conclusion in the whole sphere of reflection, which could deserve a moment's attention. But then, in the practical affairs of life, they were not to bid adieu to common sense. They were not to be swallowed up in "one idea." They were not in the face of wind and tide to commit themselves to the ocean. They were like men of comprehensive views, to take *all* their interests into the account and prepare for any exigency, on which they might be thrown. They, therefore, did not confess the Savior.

The demands of Duty, they supposed, were not all consistent with each other. They found themselves in the midst of clashing obligations. One duty, then, must often be sacrificed to another. Their faith demanded a confession. A thousand voices summoned them to the Savior's side. But then a thousand voices forbade them to confess Him. What amidst these distracting and conflicting influences could they do but hold themselves *uncommitted*? And so, to escape from the figments of their own imagination, they rushed into the arms of Atheism!

To descend a little to particulars, it may well be supposed, that our dignified believers held themselves uncommitted out of regard to **THEIR GENERAL INFLUENCE**.—They had acquired a reputation. They had the confidence of their fellow-citizens. Elevated stations had been allotted them. Here they exerted a powerful and wide-spread influence. Their words were listened to. Their opinions were quoted. Their authority was respected. They were generally looked up to, as wise and strong men, who were likely to effect much for their country's welfare. If now they should *commit themselves*—should define their position—should become the outspoken disciples of the Nazarene, how dark their prospects would at once become! Their hold on the

general confidence would at once be broken. A thousand voices would reproachfully remind them, that they had thrown themselves away. They must lose caste—be put out of the synagogue. Opportunities of usefulness must then be at once cut off. All ears will be deaf, they exclaim, to our words. All hearts will be dead to our appeals. What good could come from our activity or existence? We might as well be dead as alive! And can it be, that Duty calls us thus to throw ourselves away; us, who were sent hither to “do the greatest good to the largest number of mankind;” us, who are responsible at the bar of Justice for the results, which a happy use of a well-earned reputation might produce! Surely not. To demand this at our hands is to drive us to extremes; to expose us to merited reproach. From confessing Him, therefore, they begged to be excused.

And then their relation to the Pharisees on the one hand and the Sadducees on the other rendered this apology still more plausible. These two sects regarded each other with mutual hostility. And with any true patriot—any genuine Jew, could it be a matter of indifference which of them prevailed? The Sadducees were wealthy, proud, skeptical. Much, that was generally esteemed sacred, they despised. The existence of spirits they denied. The doctrine of the resurrection they rejected. The immortality of the soul—the retributions of eternity;—these great truths, bearing so vitally upon the improvement and welfare of mankind, they refused to admit. What gross and deadly skepticism! And yet how extended and powerful was their influence! In the higher circles, they bore a decisive sway. The highest places were open to their ambition. They might aspire to the chair of the High Priest.—But the Pharisees were orthodox; full of zeal, steadfast, enterprising, active in their devotion to the true church. They spared no pains to extend its limits. “They compassed land and sea to make a proselyte.” They expressed a deep and lively interest in every thing, which in any way affected the welfare of their country. Hence, they enjoyed in a high degree popular favor—stood high in the general estimation. They were looked upon as patriots and saints.—Now in the estimation of our believers, both the Sadducees and the Pharisees were radically defective. Both the one and the other rejected the Messiah. The Hope of Israel—the Desire of nations they spurned,

even while dwelling with affected rapture on the predictions which looked to His incarnation. But then the general influence of the Pharisees must be preferred to that of the Sadducees. Their measures were better adapted to promote the general welfare. They were less hostile to freedom—more ready to vindicate the rights of the people. And one of the two, either the Pharisees or Sadducees, must prevail. For what could a *third* party do? A handful of names, which one might almost count up on one's fingers! They might argue and struggle—define, prove and explain—they might remonstrate, warn and entreat; but what could they effect? In the face and eyes of powerful parties—in opposition to an overwhelming and determined majority! Was it not their duty, then, to join with the party whose measures and movements were least injurious to Christianity? If by withholding their countenance and aid from the Pharisees, the Sadducees should triumph, ought they not to hold themselves responsible for so disastrous a result?\* Would they not indirectly support the pretensions of the Sadducees? And could they think of taking such an attitude? Surely not. How then could they confess the Savior?

And for supporting the claims of the Savior, were they not at the right position? Not in the view of Peter, James and John. *They* had openly and zealously devoted themselves to the Christian cause. Every where they were outspoken and decided in maintaining, that Jesus was the Messiah. They made on no occasion any secret of their allegiance to Him. And those, who could not in this matter conform to their standard—who could not go with them in their measures, they were but too forward to denounce. They even affected to doubt, whether the man, who made a secret of his faith, could be a Christian! That Peter, James and John were well-meaning men, they were not prepared to deny. Doubtless they were honest. But the warmth of their feelings hurried them on too rapidly. Their views were too contracted. Their acquaintance with mankind was too limited. They did not rightly understand where lay the golden medium. They had not studied the limitations of human obligations. All their various

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\* "The Speaker ought not to have excluded Mr. Joshua Leavitt, to whom he was so deeply indebted for the chair he occupied!"

interests and relations, they did not take into the account. They were too much engrossed with a single subject. They were swallowed up in one idea. Hence their plans and operations often brought them into harsh collision with those, whom they were trying to convince and persuade. They excited the prejudices and aroused the passions of their fellow-citizens. They exposed themselves to reproach and opposition. And the ill effects of their misguided zeal reached their Master. Their loud professions of regard embarrassed His movements—retarded the progress of His cause. They had thus by their well-intended but ill-directed efforts put back the success of His mission at least fifty years. Thus instead of doing good, they had inflicted injury. As for themselves, our believers maintained, that their faith in the Messiahship of Jesus was as sincere as any body's—as that of Peter, James and John. But why should they lose self-possession, and rush, uncalled, into difficulty and danger; and thus injure the cause they ought to cherish and protect? Surely, there was a way of doing things. They ought not to fall below the very serpents in wisdom. Why should they not instead of attacking the prejudices and inflaming the passions of their fellow-men, just watch for opportunities and take them with guile? And any word they might get a chance prudently to say for the Nazarene would be listened to. As they held on to their old connections, kept the cord of caste unbroken, preserved their respectability, they might on fit occasions, when none were present to take offense, advocate the claims of the Savior. In this way, they persuaded themselves, they should effect far more in the Christian cause, than by an open confession. Were they not then His truest and wisest disciples?

In dwelling on the case before us, *the difficulties which press upon the advocate of unpalatable and unpopular truth are naturally suggested.*\* What more could be done to bring the Rulers whom the text describes, to the side of the Savior? They were well persuaded, that He was the Messiah. They admitted, that their long-cherished expectations—that their best hopes were fulfilled in Him. That they owed Him

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\* "O, uncle," exclaimed James, after witnessing his fruitless efforts to convince an elder brother, "don't talk to him. *Give him a stick of candy.*" Such arguments and such alone can avail any thing with the UNCOMMITTED friends of Humanity. They are at your service whenever you can offer them a stick of candy.

allegiance, they could not deny. Honor, consistency, nay decency demanded, that they should support His claims—that they should stand up in the face of any form of opposition and sustain His authority. To this one object their faith required them to make every thing subservient. And every disciple of the Savior had a sacred claim to their countenance and assistance. Rulers as they were, how powerfully might they not contribute to the common objects to which all Christians were devoted! Their poorer, feebler brethren might well expect to find in them a prop and a shield. But alas! while they believed in the Savior, they refused to confess Him. Nothing could induce them to express their faith in a corresponding practice. What now shall be done for their benefit? How can their co-operation be secured? What arguments will you employ? They are believers already! As much so as yourselves! You must leave them uncommitted. Whatever may be your struggles and exposures, you must let them maintain their neutrality. *They will see you crucified before they will avow themselves!* Nor must they be denounced. Oh no! They are with you in *principle*. It is only on the ground of *measures*, that they choose to stand aloof. Thus they throw themselves as a dead weight upon the already burdened shoulders of their brethren! Thus it has always been—thus it continues to be. As an illustration, take the position of many of our countrymen in the Anti-slavery controversy. The question to be settled was, Shall the principles of the Gospel be applied to the condition of the slave? Shall the murderous falsehood, which the chattel principle asserts, be exposed? Shall the slave be permitted to enjoy his inalienable rights—to wield his God-given prerogatives? Shall his manhood be acknowledged? Shall he be protected from intolerable insults and killing injuries? Shall he be free to appropriate what the Savior has purchased for his benefit? Shall he be encouraged and assisted in treading the heavenly pathway—in seeking everlasting repose in the bosom of his Father? Or shall we continue to trample on the image of God, impressed upon his person? And treat a man as a chattel? And maintain a system of legalized theft, adultery and murder? And hold ourselves up to the execration of mankind as a band of hypocrites, and knaves, and cut-throats? And our religion as a piece of priestcraft, which even highwaymen and assas-

sins might well spurn as beneath their notice? And expose ourselves to the withering displeasure of Almighty God?

Such were the questions, which it was the design of the Anti-slavery controversy to settle. And almost every body professed to be friendly to the slave. Voices on every hand exclaimed, To be sure, we regard him as a man; entitled to all the privileges and prerogatives which belong to our common humanity. He is grievously oppressed; and we abhor oppression. To tyranny under all its forms, we have been opposed ever since we knew the meaning of the word. But from prompt and decisive action we must be excused. Circumstances alter cases. Slavery has intertwined itself with all the fibres of the body politic. It has insinuated itself into all the relations we sustain. It has affected all our institutions, and entered more or less vitally into all our arrangements. It is a disturbing force, for which every party in politics and every sect in religion must make provision. We must then be careful what we do. Our reputation, our influence, our prospects—all these dear and sacred things demand of us the utmost prudence, caution, circumspection. And as the open friends of Freedom on the one hand and its open foes on the other often express themselves rashly and recklessly, why should not we keep silence?

And why should we join the standard, which the avowed friends of Freedom have set up?\* Both in Church and State, what are they but a contemptible minority? What can they effect in opposition to well organized and determined majorities? What a lack of discretion should we not betray to attempt with a force so feeble to resist the stream of public sentiment! We must be allowed a little time for reflection before we venture on so doubtful an experiment.

Besides among existing sects and parties, are we not entitled to a choice? All may be radically defective where the claims of Freedom are to be maintained. All may lend their influence, directly or indirectly, to crush oppressed Humanity. But then there are OTHER INTERESTS. In these the welfare of our country is more or less involved. And does not Humanity, Patriotism, the Gospel itself require us to

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\* "The very boys in the streets will call you April fools!" An argument from a famous doctor of divinity to dissuade the friends of Freedom from acting upon their principles, politically.

join that party, provided it be powerful, which, though guilty of the sin of slavery, bids fairest at least in some respects to do good service to the republic?

And in maintaining our present position, are we not the truest friends of the slave? We may do something at once—something effective for his benefit. But the Abolitionists, stripped of their reputation, abandoned by their friends—decried, spurned, opposed;—what can be expected from their activity? What have they hitherto accomplished? That they are honest and well-meaning, we do not care to deny. But their wisdom and discretion may well be called in question. Have they not every where excited prejudice and aroused passion and awakened opposition? Have they not “put back” the cause of Freedom at least half a century? They may argue, and complain, and denounce,—we have taken our position and shall not be driven from it!

Thus has it always been—thus must it always be with all, who prefer the “praise of men to the praise of God.” They believe in the principles of the Gospel; they will hazard nothing in their application. They often hold distinguished places both in Church and State;\* but leaders though they are in office, and honors and emoluments, nothing can induce them to enter on the conflict, through which Humanity is to be redeemed. Let no earnest spirit, then rely upon their wisdom, courage, magnanimity. He must leave them uncommitted. They will even throw themselves as an obstruction in his pathway! And complain and resist, if in his onward progress he disturbs their repose! They will sooner join with those,† whom they themselves have denounced as cowards and traitors, than give him their countenance and aid! Hence the difficulties with which the advocates of unpalatable and unpopular truth are constantly beset.

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\* What are the statesmen and ecclesiastics a-doing who were so mightily convinced by the West India experiments?

† Witness such amalgamations as recently took place to the disgust of all good men in Smithfield of Whigs with Democrats to defeat the friends of Freedom and Temperance. What a spectacle! At the prayer-meeting; all a-glow with zeal in behalf of the drunkard and the slave; at the ballot-box, eager to sacrifice both the one and the other on the altar of selfishness! And then such an air of assurance;—as much as to say; I'll let you know I can go to the Devil, without asking leave of you!

*But the perils are neither few nor small, which threaten those, who thus resist their own convictions.*—The light, which Heaven may shed upon our pathway;—that we are most gratefully to welcome—to hold at the highest price. Every ray is an expression of unspeakable goodness. It demands the warmest praise. Hence the exclamations of the Hebrew Psalmist; “O how love I thy holy Law!” “Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy Law.”—But what do we, when we resist the convictions, to which the light of Truth may conduct us? We trifle with divine compassion! We set at naught the lessons of Heavenly wisdom! We expose ourselves to endless perplexities and hopeless embarrassments! *And we resist our own convictions, when we do not faithfully confess what we sincerely believe.*

And what became of our “believing Rulers,” who were too prudent to confess their Savior? And what became of the Pharisees, they were so much afraid of? And the synagogues, they could not bear to be excluded from? And what became of their general influence? Who was the better for the choice, which involved them in the “least of two evils”? And their private patronage of the Christian cause:—what good came of it? Did they outwit the grand Deceiver? And protect their country from Roman violence? And did their prudence shield them from the effects of their selfishness and cowardice and hypocrisy? And while spurning the Cross, did they reach the Crown?

Let no man rely on the expedients of a carnal wisdom. The prudence of cunning men;—O, seek not counsel there! What can all their sophistry avail? *We have to do with God*, who demands simplicity, fidelity, integrity. While He sheds light around us, let us walk in the light. Thus and thus only can we escape the doom of those, who stumble and fall and miserably perish.